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Staunton, William

The hope of the church



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THE HOPE OF THE CHURCH.

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A

SERMON,

PREACHED BY

THE REV. WILLIAM STAUNTON,

RECTOR OF ST. PETER'S, MORRISTOWN, NEW JERSEY,

IN THE

CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF ST. JAMES,

TORONTO,

ON SUNDAY, THE 5TH JUNE, 1842.

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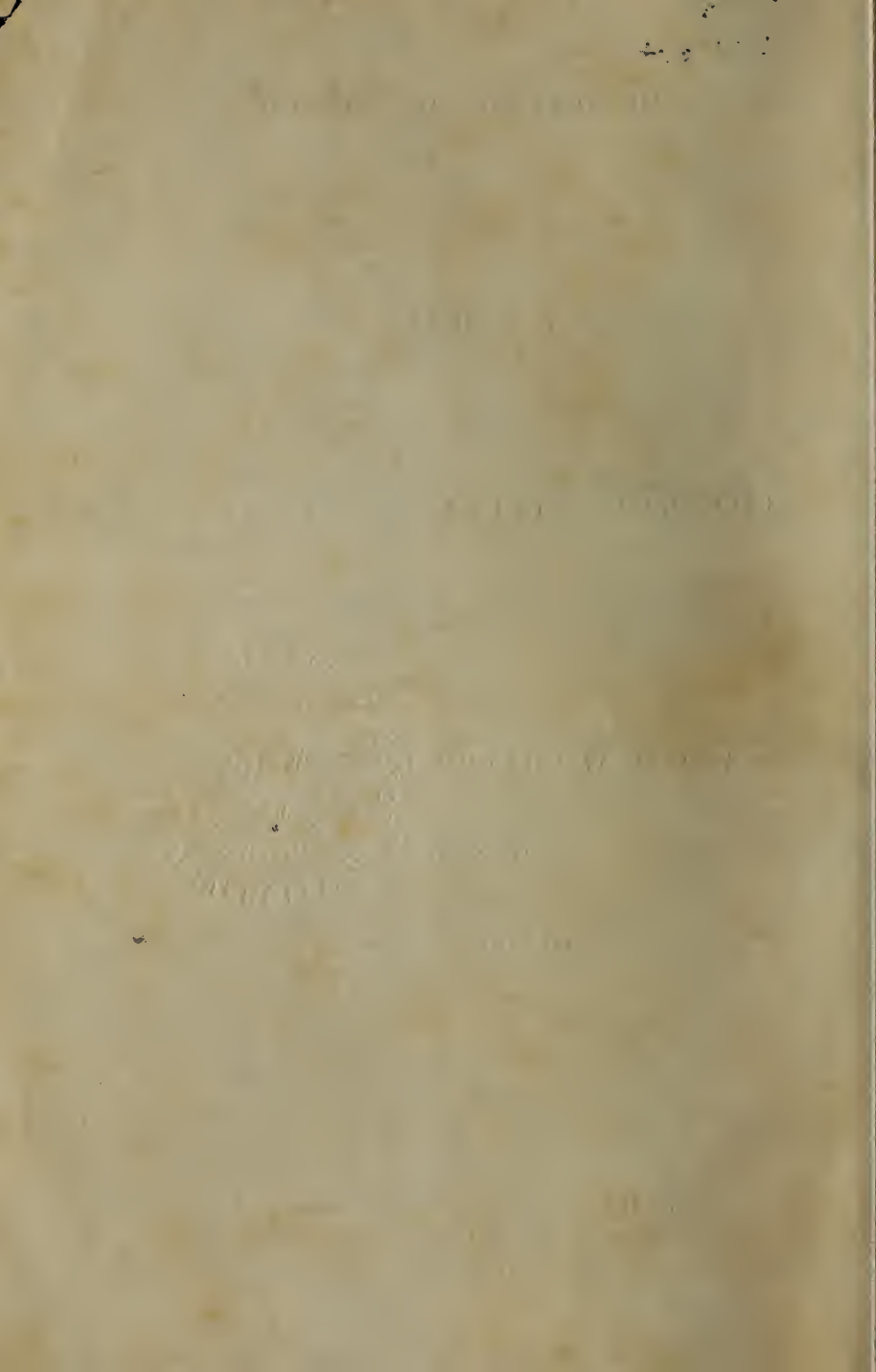
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## S E R M O N, & c.

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*There is hope in thine end, saith the Lord, that thy children shall come again to their own border.*—JEREMIAH, xxxi. 17.

ON no topic is the Bible more clear and explicit than in setting forth the everlasting love of God for his Church. Manifold as were the sins, and grievous the apostacies of the Church before the coming of Christ, yet, we may read how the Almighty, in the midst of his just judgments, always remembered mercy, declaring again and again that those seasons of awful declension should be succeeded by times of refreshing, and periods in which, through the gracious influences of his spirit, the decayed places of Zion should be restored, and the temple of the Lord shine forth in its beauty. The tyranny of the enemies of God might trample the holiest things in the dust, and defile the sanctuary, for a time, with abominable idolatries; but after the painful discipline thus forced out for the rebuke of men's wickedness had fulfilled its purpose, in the humiliation of a sinful Church, the Lord was ever ready to stay the hand of punishment, and not to suffer his whole displeasure to arise, seeing that to Abraham and his seed were the promises made,—promises of ultimate prosperity, and of a renown which should fill the whole earth with evidences that there was indeed a God in Israel.

Nor did this remarkable feature in the course of providence cease to manifest itself on the dissolution of the Jewish Church. For God is ever the same in the administration of his moral government—allotting to bodies of men, as well as to individuals, the just reward of their sins and the penalty of their declensions. Thus, when the seven Churches of Asia began to fall from their first love, immediately the warning came, that unless they should repent and do their first works, the

candlestick would be removed from their midst, and the Lord would speedily visit them with the sword of his mouth. Yet, coupled with these threats, we do not fail to meet the evidences of God's enduring love, in a train of encouraging promises of blessings on their obedience, fully equal in strength to the calamities denounced against the inexcusable failure of their zeal.

So also at a later period; when the ambition and worldly power of Rome had gained access to the Apostolical Church of England, and brought in a tide of corruption, destructive of the purity of the ancient faith, and crowding down the souls of men with a burden of errors, superinduced on the integrity of the primitive system,—God permitted the wilfulness of man to be the instrument of His wrath upon the Church; and sorely was it punished for ages by the natural and necessary results of those errors, which, though remonstrated against in successive periods by the rulers of the Church, were too much encouraged by the servile spirit, covertly, or by threatening influences, infused into the great mass of its members. Still, bad as the case was, Christ had not forsaken his Church, nor had his blessed promise failed. A time of *restoration* came; and after the Church had borne with the unexampled tyranny of the Roman pontiffs for six hundred years, she was made able, in God's strength, to purge her temples, and to become purely Catholic, by getting rid of Popery.

It seems, then, from these examples, (to which many others might be added), that though God may visit the Church, for her sins, with a long course of tribulations and adversities, yet there is hope in the end, that his mercy will interpose, and, by some remarkable turn of providence, revive again the faded beauty of Zion, and build up her waste places in greater glory than at the first.

Let us now bear this maxim in mind, and reverently inquire whether there are not strong evidences, that at this very day the spirit of God is abroad, working with a mighty power for the deliverance of his Church from the evils, which, for many years, have kept her wandering and weeping like an exile in the wilderness. Let us first inquire—

I. What is the present state of what is called "the Christian world?" Is it such as it *ought* to be,—the New Testament being judge? The glory of the Church is, that it should appear as a city that is at unity with itself. But *where* is this



unity? No where! Large numbers of men, who profess the name of Christ, are rent and torn into a thousand parties,—each boasting of its own independence,—all claiming the Bible, and yet believing or not believing just what they please,—some contending for *this* creed, others for *that*, and many spurning the restraint of any creed at all; while another sturdy race, in the land of Calvin and Luther, honestly tell us they have found out that Moses and Homer, St. Paul and Cicero, David and Milton, were all moved by the same kind of inspiration, and that one-half of the Bible is nothing but a series of fine oriental fables. This is the kind of unity we have *now* to contemplate. A man or woman, with a fluent tongue, starts up,—modestly asserts that the Church is, and ever has been, in the wrong,—digests a new scheme of faith,—proclaims it with all the authority of a messenger from the skies,—and forthwith a new sect comes to life;—men call it a *Church*,—it grows,—makes its own ministers,—rears its pulpits,—becomes wealthy, and therefore respected,—and, in a few years, falls into the train of older brotherhoods, silencing every rebuke by its noisy appeals for charity, and branding the reprover with the title of bigot. This is not fancy, but what we may see and read with our own eyes. Nay, so little do men fear the awful sin of schism, that they pride themselves on the privilege of committing it; and so far may division extend itself in the existing forgetfulness of accountability to God, that the case may arise of a man originating a new system of doctrine, and, in the failure of getting disciples, becoming a Church to himself.

And, worst of all, myriads of children now rising up, are taught from infancy (especially in this sect-ridden land) to look upon the Gospel as a religion in which there is no certainty, and upon salvation as equally sure whether a man does the will of God, or follows the devices and desires of his own heart. I say, that this *is* and will be the practical result flowing from the present state of things.

But, if all this be true, you inquire, how is it that pious and sensible men are willing to bear with the grievances and hazards imposed upon them by the systems to whose support they have committed themselves? I answer, that every day brings fresh proofs of the very reverse. Such men are to be found in every denomination of the age, who groan for deliverance from their liability to be “tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine,”—who are heartily wearied and

dispirited under the contentions which rob their souls of rest, and convert the religion of Christ into a scene of pious quarelling, for which no counterpart can be found in the feuds of either Jew or Mahometan. Yes, there is evidence enough that in every sectarian body there are men of integrity and courage who have set themselves to inquire *why* these things are so, and what is the remedy for them;—men who, with the fear of God before their eyes, and with the history of the Church and the ancient Fathers in their hands, begin to see the everlasting foundations of primitive truth, and from before whose eyes the mists are rapidly dispersing, which had hitherto hidden from them the glorious beauty of the Church of the living God. I speak thus confidently, because the appeal is to *facts*, and because facts are *truth*, and because truth can offend none but the dishonest, and because I take for granted that none *such* are here present before God.

Throughout what is commonly called the religious world, there is at this time an appetite, growing every day more and more intense among men who “love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity,” for certain views of religion which shall satisfy the soul, and leave no anxious doubts to distress the mind, or apprehensions that the will of Christ has not been fairly and fully met. And, taking the simple facts of the case, it is not difficult to see what it is that men *want*, and what at all hazards they are resolved to *have*. For instance, they want, and will have, a *more truly catholic spirit and feeling*. They learn from the New Testament that the Redeemer founded one Church and no more,—that all Christians throughout the world were to be of one name, thoroughly joined together in the same mind and in the same fellowship. Divisions and strifes were to be unknown—nay, they were denounced by the Apostles with a vehemence which was truly alarming. And, by consulting the Acts of the Apostles and the history of the Church, these inquiring men have found that for many centuries this state of universal harmony *did* pervade the whole christian body. A man who was a member of the Church *anywhere*, was a member of the Church *everywhere*. He might travel from pole to pole, and from one end of the earth to the other, and find himself at home in every Christian temple, and as fully in the enjoyment of all his privileges in one place as in another. Every baptized man in Europe, Asia, or Africa, was his brother. From every pulpit he heard the same doctrines. He might kneel at every



altar, and no man would ask him whether he belonged to this or that "denomination," for the simple reason that there were no "denominations but one,"—for all were striving together for the *one only* "faith of the Gospel." And from the same sources of information, he learns that this lovely spirit of unity pervaded the whole mass of the Clergy. A Minister of God needed only to show the testimonials of his ordination by a Catholic Bishop, and however distant from his native land, he would find his authority respected, and every brother Clergyman would give him the right hand of fellowship, and a free participation in all ministerial offices. There was no schism in the body, and the spirit of peace bound the host of God's elect into one firm and compact body.

Now, as I have said, there is at this time, a rapidly increasing desire for the restoration of this undivided communion, among all classes of religious men who read the New Testament seriously, and who are convinced that godliness cannot flourish amidst strife and separation. And it is not in the power of men to check the movement to which this feeling has given rise. Satisfied that nothing less than unity in the one Church, is to obey the will of Christ, they are determined, so far as their individual exertions can go, to *have* it. Hence the numbers who are forsaking the societies of their former attachment, and reverently seeking for the old paths and the ancient ways, that they may walk therein.

II. Men who have courage enough to face the prejudices of the age, are looking for something that shall satisfy them as to the real authority of those who claim to have the rule over them, as ambassadors of the Lord—the head of the Church. It is clear that no man can say he has a *natural right* to feed and govern the flock of Christ. The right must be *given* to him. But who is to give it?—certainly not the *people*, for the *Lord Jesus alone* is the source of ministerial power. No congregation of laymen can *make* or constitute a Minister of Christ. For, what is such a Minister? Is he simply an educated man who has the ability to preach sermons? But many a *layman* could do this. Is he simply a pious person who has the faculty of being useful?—But many a religious *woman* may have the same faculty. Is he simply a person of ready utterance, who can make prayers and speak consolatory words to the sick, and set forth to sinners the threats and promises of God's word? Why, surely all this may be done by many who never *thought* of claiming a part and lot in the

Ministry. So then, though a Minister ought undoubtedly to possess all these qualifications, yet there must be something *besides* these, on which he shall ground his right to appear before the Church in *God's* name, and as *Christ's* ambassador. For the people might very naturally inquire, "by *what authority* doest thou these things, and who gave thee this authority?" And if he should refer them simply to his reputation for piety and usefulness, still the people might say, "no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron;" and their question would yet remain unanswered. And if he should allege that he was ordained by such and such men, the people might have good sense enough to go back to the previous question, and ask, "who ordained *THEM*?" And, if this were answered in the same way, it is not unlikely that intelligent laymen might have their curiosity excited, to know *how far back* this series of ordinations reached,—and who *began* it,—and whether he who *did* begin it, had *authority* so to do; for if he had *not* this authority, he could communicate nothing to those whom he ordained, nor could they to their successors; and so, the whole series to the world's end would be claiming powers which their founder himself had no title to convey.

Now, as I have intimated, there are at this moment thousands of men in Europe and America, who are looking into *this very serious* question;—they are inquiring for the peaceful Church of the Redeemer, and for the pastoral authority of those who, *beyond all doubt*, can trace their title to feed and rule the flock from no other hands than those of Jesus Christ, and his inspired Apostles. And, not a few of them have found out, that the Apostolic office has actually been continued to the present day, in the persons of those called Bishops; and also, that (Scripture and the united voice of the world for 1500 years being witness) to *these* alone, and to those ordained by them, is the promise given, "whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven." As a result of this spirit of inquiry, we hear almost every week of preachers, belonging to various denominations of Christians, resigning their offices, and soliciting ordination at the hands of the Bishops. "There is hope in thine end, saith the Lord, that thy children shall come again to their own border."

III. There is another fact which goes to prove that a beneficial change is rapidly taking place in religious senti-

ment. I refer to the revival of those sound, reverential, and scriptural views of the SACRAMENTS, which men were accustomed to entertain in the purer ages of the Church. To satisfy any one that there is *abundant room* for such a revival, it is only necessary to compare with the words of Scripture, the common practice and phraseology of the day respecting these ordinances of the Redeemer. Thus, baptism is considered by many, and so spoken of, as the act of *giving a name* to a child; or as an ancient religious custom, which, on the whole, it is better to observe than to neglect. And hence, the grand point of spiritual blessings connected with it, as a *Sacrament*, is altogether overlooked; so that many men no longer regard it, in serious truth, as “an outward and visible sign, of an *inward and spiritual grace*.” Nay, some have proceeded so far as to question the necessity of it at all; and thousands pass from childhood to adult age, and even through a long life, without receiving that ordinance which, in the very lowest view, is yet a badge to distinguish them from the heathen. And yet we have bibles telling us, that “as many as are baptized, have put on Christ,”—that we are buried with Christ in baptism unto death,—that we must be baptized for the remission of sins,—that he that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved,—that baptism doth even now save us, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ,—that it is the laver of regeneration, and that “except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” Can any thing be more striking and alarming than the contrast!

Nor will our sorrow for this falling away from the truth be alleviated by viewing the errors which have grown up respecting the Lord's Supper. How many have reduced it to a simple exercise of the memory,—a mere *remembering* of the death of the Saviour, and the seemingly superfluous partaking of bread and wine! No doubt it is a memorial, “in remembrance” of Christ; but it is also vastly *more*. What means the Apostle when he calls it the “communion” and the “communication” of the body and blood of Christ?—when he charges some with not discerning the Lord's body?—when he speaks of men eating and drinking damnation or condemnation to themselves?—and of those who were guilty of the body and blood of the Lord? What means the Saviour when he says, “except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you?” Let it be realized, that this



is the very language of inspiration. Let it be seen by intelligent men how tenderly such Scriptures are used,—how they are evaded,—how they are explained away,—how they are made to bow to public sentiment, instead of making public sentiment bow to them; and can such men do otherwise than look with longing interest to that ancient Church, which has embodied all these gems of holy writ in her sweet liturgy, and at every Communion gives full play to their faith, unchilled by the interposition of frigid comments and metaphysical theorizing on the *manner* in which all this can be true?

IV. Men are inquiring for some system of public worship, which shall call forth and inflame their devotional feelings, and give them ample security that their *rights*, as participants in that worship, shall not be invaded. Every Christian man has an inalienable right and title, not merely to a *passive* but to an *active* part in the celebration of divine service. He does not go to Church to *hear his Minister pray*, but to offer up prayers *unitedly with his Minister*. And, in the nature of things, it is next to impossible that this can be done without the use of a form. There are *extempore* forms, and there are *written* forms; but in all cases a congregation *must* follow a form, so long as *one man only* gives the words, and the others are expected to give their assent to it. But in *public extempore prayer*, how can the worshipper be assured that his devotions will not be disturbed by some expression, some local allusion, some doctrinal error, to which he cannot freely say, “Amen?”—He is committed entirely to the course of thought in which the speaker chooses to indulge. And even if he were safe on *this* point, yet, one-half of his attention, at the least, must be given to the *language* and *sentiment* of the prayer; thereby abstracting his thoughts from the right object, and quenching the ardour of that *spirit* of supplication, on which depends all the benefit he can hope for at the throne of grace. And besides, where is his *active* participation in the offering of the sacrifice of prayer and thanksgiving? Is he not altogether deprived of it? since he knows not beforehand *what* he is to pray, and at the very time has no part assigned him but a solitary and forlorn “Amen.” Worse than all, if the Minister should happen to be under depression of mind,—if he should happen to be languid, cold, slow of speech, deficient in talent, or easily affected with private griefs and anxieties, it is certain that his feelings will give colour to his prayers, and influence their style far more perhaps than he would wish; and all this

transfers itself immediately to the congregation, deadening their devotion, distracting their thoughts, making them plod their weary way to heaven's gate, when, if *ever*, they should rise "on faith's sublimest wing" to the presence of "the majesty on high."

No wonder that men have begun to look with a loving eye to the ancient liturgies of the Church, where they may realize all that their hearts can wish for,—prayers, which touch their souls with "a beam of light divine, to guide their upward aim,"—prayers, which bring consolation to the weeping penitent, and confirm the joys of the ripest saint,—prayers, which call into action both the hearts and voices of all the Lord's people, from the little child to the veteran in Christ,—and prayers, too, which raise an insurmountable barrier against the intrusion of petitions and allusions expressive of the peculiar opinions, or arising from the personal frailties and griefs, of the Minister who offers them.

Would the time permit, I might go on to show that inquiring men, of every religious name, are not only looking for satisfaction in the points now enumerated, but are also resolved to embrace some system of religion which shall make them confident in the persuasion that they are in the enjoyment of the *whole* Gospel of Christ. Doubtfulness is one of the worst of all spiritual diseases,—eating into the soul "as doth a canker." To enjoy true peace in believing, a man must not only suppose that he *may be* in the right, because many others agree with him; but he must have the best assurance the case admits of, that he *really is* in the right. And, to be sure of this, he must *so* receive and practise the gospel, that if any *one text* raises in his mind a suspicion that he may be in error, he will take no rest till, in God's help, he has found and conformed to the truth. Not only is this true in Christian doctrine and morals, but also in relation to all things ordained by the Saviour for the building up of men "in their most holy faith." If, then, any one should read in every part of the New Testament that Christ founded a Church, into which all good men were to be gathered, and to which his promises were made, such a person will honestly see to it that he is actually *in* that Church; and he will cease to regard this as a trivial inquiry, when he observes how the Apostles speak of the sinfulness of schism, and of the importance of preserving unity in the body of Christ.



I mention this, as an example to show *how* every man is bound to act, who desires to submit in all things to the will of the great Shepherd and Bishop of souls. It is true, that such a course may not be the most popular; it may even excite odium, and meet with much resistance from prejudice; the man may be accounted exclusive, or even bigotted, because he sees certain truths in a clearer light than others who have not accompanied him in his investigations. But all this is only a necessary evil which time will wear out, and which, at any rate, will not disturb his death-bed. He will remember these words of Christ, "Wo unto you, when all men speak well of you;" and will meet reproach by asking, "Am I become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?"

Thank God, we do not need merely to *suppose* a case. We have arrived at a period in which the powerful energies of the Church are again breaking forth in the sight of a wondering world, while, at the same time, those who have wandered from her care, are hastening to throng her courts. How beautifully do the words of the Prophet apply, "There is hope in thine end, saith the Lord, that thy children shall come again to their own border." "*Thy* children," and "*their own* border:" because as the Church was designed to embrace the whole company of the faithful, all good men are hers by *right*, and her privileges are theirs: therefore, in fleeing to *the Church*, they do not transfer themselves to some other sect or party, but they *return* to the noble heritage which their fathers, in the infirmity of their judgment, forsook;—they return to their ancient *home*, and to the fostering care of *their own true Mother*. Let religious men think of this,—let them compare the blessings of peace, concord, and Christian unity, with the appalling evils of division, and the time may be hastened when God will cease to punish the Church, and when, as in the Apostles' days, there will be no schism in the body; but, under that authority which Christ gave "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, we [shall] all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

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